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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5513
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4020
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1355
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3173
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7986
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5627
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0396
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2314
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001259

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN NAVY SINKS THREE LARGE LTTE SHIPS IN
THE INDIAN OCEAN

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O Blake, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: On September 12, Ambassador and Defense Attache Oxley met with Sri Lanka Navy Commander Wasantha Karannagoda to discuss the navy's recent operational successes, including sinking three large Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) weapons supply ships (referred to by the media as "motherships") approximately 1,200 kilometers southeast of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean on September 10 and 11. Karannagoda stated that the SLN has also destroyed ten LTTE trawlers and one large transport ship this year. These successes have likely dealt a "devastating" blow to the Tiger's weapons smuggling efforts, according to Karannagoda. The military expects the LTTE to attempt a large retaliatory attack to prove it has not been defeated, and Karannagoda speculated that it could occur before LTTE Supreme Commander Velupillai Prabhakaran's November 27 "Heroes' Day" speech. To protect against such an attack, Karannagoda said that the military has identified certain vulnerabilities and are working to remedy them. He also said that they are tracking a fourth "mothership" and expect to overtake it in the next 24 hours. Karannagoda inquired about the likelihood of obtaining additional military support, including the transfer of one or two Coast Guard cutters, from the USG. END SUMMARY.

SRI LANKA SINKS THREE LARGE LTTE WEAPONS TRANSPORT SHIPS

¶2. (S) The Sri Lanka Navy attacked and sank three large LTTE weapons ships in international waters approximately 1,200 kilometers southeast of Sri Lanka on September 10 and 11. Sri Lankan media carried the story, including pictures of the three burning vessels, the following day and reported that the Navy was still searching for a fourth mothership. Ambassador and Defense Attache met on September 12 with SLN Commander Wasantha Karannagoda to discuss the SLN operation and efforts to track and destroy the fourth ship. Karannagoda said that the ships contained parts for three light aircraft, an armored vehicle apparently meant for

transporting Prabhakaran, heavy artillery, ammunition and fuel. Karannagoda told us that the SLN filmed the attacks and counted at least 72 secondary explosions while sinking the second Tiger vessel. The SLN is gathering debris from the sunken vessels and searching for surviving LTTE cadres. Media reports speculated that at least 45 LTTE cadres were killed in the operations. Karannagoda told Ambassador that the navy is tracking the fourth ship and expect to overtake it within the next 24 hours, postulating that it may not have sufficient fuel to evade the Sri Lankan pursuers.

13. (C) In the past year, the SLN has destroyed ten LTTE trawlers and one other large weapons transport ship, according to Karannagoda. He said that as a result of these operations, even prior to the destruction of three of the Tiger's four motherships, the LTTE's naval capabilities have been significantly weakened. However, Karannagoda cautioned that the Tigers still maintain a formidable "navy" and shared recent intelligence that the LTTE is working on developing suicide boats capable of traveling between 35 and 40 knots.

SLN FORTIFYING WEAKNESSES IN ANTICIPATION OF TIGER ATTACK

14. (S) Ambassador asked Karannagoda whether the military expected the LTTE to launch a large military assault or terrorist attack against civilians in the coming months to demonstrate that they are still a viable threat. Karannagoda responded that the military anticipated that the LTTE will seek to demonstrate that it has not been destroyed, especially in light of its recent defeat in the East and the

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destruction of its motherships. Karannagoda postulated that the LTTE may attempt a high-profile attack prior to Prabhakaran's annual "Heroes' Day" speech on November 27. As a result, the military is working to remedy weaknesses that it has identified, including sea-based troop transport to Jaffna and protection of training camps south of Vavuniya from suicide attacks using the LTTE's remaining light aircraft. Karannagoda added that military and police were on heightened alert to guard against attacks on civilians.

15. (S) Karannagoda pointed to the SLN's recent operational successes as a good example of the military using resources obtained from the USG to combat terrorism. He specifically mentioned use of the Coast Guard cutter USS Courageous and inquired about the possibility of obtaining additional cutters in the future. Ambassador agreed that the SLN's use of the Courageous was a concrete example demonstrating Sri Lanka's effective use of USG technology, but cautioned that there are many demands from friendly countries for additional cutters in the near future. Defense Attache added that the U.S. military has not been able to produce new cutters as rapidly as expected, necessitating the continued use of cutters that would otherwise be available for re-sale to countries like Sri Lanka.

16. (C) COMMENT: The loss of three of its four motherships, and the possible destruction of the fourth in the next 24 hours, will certainly have a devastating impact on the LTTE's ability to re-supply its cadres in the Vanni. Destruction of the motherships represents a critical blow to the Tiger's global weapons transport assets that cannot be easily or quickly replaced. Both we and the Sri Lankan government are concerned that the LTTE may now resort to terrorist tactics in has used in the past to demonstrate its continuing viability, including the use of suicide bombers and/or targeting civilians. Embassy will hold an Emergency Action Committee meeting to assess the possible threat.

BLAKE